As part of a project started in 2024, this oral history transcript was generated by an AI tool and corrected by GW Library staff. When staff had difficulty understanding speakers or were unsure of a word or a phrase they used [unintelligible] or the name in brackets with a question mark as a placeholder. In addition, at times staff were uncertain how to spell names or differentiate people if only first names were used and therefore it is possible people are misidentified.

The Metro Oral History Project collection is housed at the GW Special Collections Research Center. The collection includes recordings of oral histories conducted by Dr. Zachary Schrag for his dissertation, "*The Washington Metro as vision and vehicle, 1955–2001*" and for his subsequent book *The Great Society Subway*. The interviewer, Zachary Schrag, donated the Metro Oral History Project to GW in 2007.

If you need assistance using this transcript please contact special collections at speccoll@gwu.edu.

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;36;24

Zachary Schrag: Okay. Zachary Schrag is interviewing Professor Ralph Rohner It is September 15th, 1999, around 2:00. We are in his office at Catholic University in Washington, DC. And, you said you grew up in Baltimore and first came to Washington in Fall of what? 1956?

Ralph Rohner: 1956. That's right.

Schrag: And did you know Washington before then?

Rohner: We had some family, an aunt who lived here that whom we visited quite often.

00;00;36;24 - 00;00;57;29

Rohner: And so, yeah, we've been down here a number of times.

Schrag: Where, where did she live?

Rohner: She lived, actually, she worked here at the University and lived right out in Maryland. Mount Rainier. So we had, I remember a number of times as a, as a child, before I came to college, coming down to visit her. And usually the University as well.

00;00;58;01 - 00;01;22;25

Schrag: So you were familiar with the area. You were not awed by Washington as...?

Rohner: I probably not at that point. You know, when you're 18, you're not awed by anything.

Schrag: And can you describe, you lived on campus at that point?

Rohner: I did. Yes.

Schrag: And did you travel around the city as a college student at all?

Rohner: Oh, my lord, yes, all the time.

00;01;22;28 - 00;01;45;23

Rohner: All the time.

Schrag: How did you get around?

Rohner: Riding public transportation! The trolleys ran out, all the way out here into Brookland, at least through my freshman year of college. Maybe sophomore. I'm not sure, but I can remember riding the old three rail trolleys that came right right along Michigan Avenue and up into into Brookland. And the busses, obviously, as well.

00;01;45;23 - 00;02;09;22

Rohner: And then after the trolleys disappeared, we'd ride busses everywhere. That was the only way to get around! The old O. Roy Chalk green and white busses.

Schrag: And what were the trolleys and the busses like? Were you...impressed?

Rohner: [interjecting] Well, yeah, [grown up?] in Baltimore. And so we'd ridden the same kind of transportation there. Busses and streetcars. I, I don't know that I thought anything in particular. I didn't care.

00;02;09;23 - 00;02;34;15

Rohner: Cause I was used to them. I guess I was intrigued with the third rail because in Baltimore they were all running on overhead trolleys. So [there's?] something a little more neat, I guess, about riding on the, on the third rail. But they were, you know, at the time, without a car. And even if you had a car at times it was better to go on the bus or the, or the streetcar, the trolley down downtown.

00;02;34;17 - 00;03;05;25

Rohner: You know, I don't have any particular recollection except that they were reasonably reliable.

Schrag: Were they comfortable?

Rohner: Eh, not bad. And again you don't, I don't I, I don't think I would often ride them at, at rush hour, you know, at busy times. Usually be weekends and evenings and that kind of thing. I don't have any particular recollection of being crowded or crushed or crunched.

00;03;05;28 - 00;03;32;23

Rohner: I don't know. What else can I, what else can I say?

Schrag: What kind of people rode public transportation at that time?

Rohner: Well, every...I mean, I, a lot of people, and I dare say I wasn't particularly class conscious at that, that point, but, clearly a lot of of blue collar, you know, relatively unskilled working people who rode the busses and streetcars.

00;03;32;25 - 00;03;59;18

Rohner: I have a sense that, that, that even professionals, you know, government workers and the like, would ride them. I mean, that was, there was no alternative, other than walking or having your own car and hauling it downtown. I just, I get my general sense is that it was just sort of, you know, an

omnipresent reality. If you needed to get somewhere, you got on a bus or on, or streetcar, even all the way through law school.

00;03;59;18 - 00;04;23;08

Rohner: I stayed here for seven years and through college and law school, but, our law school was downtown at that point, down on, on Connecticut Avenue, or off DuPont Circle. And I didn't have a car, until I was a senior. And so, you know, anytime you're, and we have carpool rides to go to school in the mornings and then come home using the afternoon.

00;04;23;08 - 00;04;58;14

Rohner: But if you're doing any kind of odd, odd hours work or research in the library or something, the only way to get back to campus was, a couple of busses switching up in Mount Pleasant somewhere, as I recall. So what made you decide to get a car? Oh, I guess, thinking that, you know, I was, I don't know! I, it seemed like the thing to do! Everybody else by that time, or almost everybody else, it seemed like had a car and you just had much more control than when you wanted to go where.

Schrag: Other college students had cars?

00;04;58;17 - 00;05;24;24

Rohner: Yeah, yeah, a lot of them [didn't?]. But, busses and public transportation, DC transit was still the old fallback.

Schrag: And during that period, did you have any sense of things changing in transportation, either new roads opening up or trouble with the public transportation?

00;05;24;27 - 00;05;46;18

Rohner: Zach, to tell you the truth, I don't have any particular recollection. You know, I know at some point I was aware that they were talking about the Beltway, but when was it '60 sometime. You know, I was a typical oblivious college student. You know, you ride the bus or the trolley when you need to go somewhere. And don't worry about the larger picture.

00;05;46;20 - 00;05;52;13

Schrag: So how did you end up at the NCTA?

00;05;52;16 - 00;06;16;16

Rohner: I don't remember when they got established, but it can't have been too much earlier than '62\. That's going back to '55?

Schrag: Well, the act was passed in 1960\. But under Eisenhower, you know, it's just a sort of caretaker agency. It's my understanding really got started.

Rohner: So it was a, it was still new in in 1962\. I'm not positive...

00;06;16;16 - 00;06;32;09

Rohner: I remember how the connection was made, but, but our law school again was down at 18th and N [Streets NW], which is only a three block walk down the street to Farragut Square, where NCTA was. And I have a feeling that one of my classmates had first, you know, found them or they found him. I'm not sure which.

00;06;32;12 - 00;06;57;06

Rohner: I mean, it's not at all unlikely that that, NCTA, knowing where they were located, knowing where the law schools around town were, would have just, you know, sent in or called in a notice and said, put something on the board. But I don't have any particular recollection of, of a trigger, although I want, I want to think that, that I had one classmate had already found a place and came told me you said they're looking for other law clerks.

00;06;57;08 - 00;07;17;25

Rohner: And I don't know, I wondered about it a little bit because--and this was senior year, and you're supposed to, you know, finish in style. And I was also editor of the law review. So I had made a lot of commitment of time in the law school. And I don't remember what we worked but it was probably not much more, no more than 20 hours a week.

00;07;17;28 - 00;07;38;04

Rohner: At least most of the time. And, you know, I could always use a little money, you know, we were all scraping nickels together. And so the idea of making whatever we made, I don't have any idea. $2 an hour or something like that maybe. It sounded terrific.

Schrag: Did you have friends in law school who were working for other federal agencies or on the Hill?

00;07;38;06 - 00;07;58;25

Rohner: Oh, yeah. Yeah, by the time you got to at least the summer of your second year, and then usually all the way through third--, third year, any law student who's serious about the business, would have, would have had a summer job in that summer between second and third year, both for the experience and also for the contacts.

00;07;58;25 - 00;08;30;16

Rohner: So you had, you know, a potential place to go back to in the following year. And then during the third year of law school, then as now, almost every student has a part time job, partly for money, but more importantly for the, for the contacts, and the connections out to the, to the real world.

Schrag: And that's sort of what I'm trying to get at, as a temporary agency was NCTA, different from working for, say, the State Department, which had been around for 200 years?

00;08;30;18 - 00;08;57;08

Rohner: Oh, yeah. In fact, absolutely. The summer before, you know, it's summer between second or third year, I'd work for the Navy Department and, down in buildings, that are no longer there, down along Constitution Avenue. But, you know, the Navy program, first of all, was huge. It had been around forever. It had, you know, it had lifers and its legal, people had been there 40 years or so in, in the legal shop, and everything was done the "Navy way!"

00;08;57;08 - 00;09;18;14

Rohner: And you learned to adapt to, to that system or, or else. I remember getting screamed at because I thought I had a smart idea how to do something and they said no we don't do it that way. And I suspected most of my classmates, most law students in town, were working for the bigger mainline agencies.

00;09;18;14 - 00;09;39;16

Rohner: If they work for the government, they'd be working for the bigger mainline agencies. For lots of reasons [unintelligible]. They were bigger. They had more jobs, more likely to find an opening there. So, so finding this little NCTA down there at, I don't remember exactly how it happened, but, you know, they were just a, you know, a tiny little grain of sand on the beach of of federal agencies here in town.

00;09;39;18 - 00;10;03;08

Rohner: But it just it seemed like fun. And, and you know, they were willing to hire me. It was convenient to the law school. So there's no, no profound reason for, for going there except that it offered some, some short term...rewards.

Schrag: So could you expand...you described the culture at the NCTA and also compare that to the culture at the Navy Department? Because that's very interesting from a bureaucratic standpoint view.

00;10;03;08 - 00;10;30;29

Rohner: I get, I mean, I'm not sure I truly trust my memory, but. Well, I actually described the Navy, but, you know, it was much more structured and you had, you know, you had libraries full of uniquely naval legal materials that you learned to work with, and people had their systems, and the old timers had their expectations.

00;10;31;02 - 00;11;01;19

Rohner: And there was, you know, a wealth of federal law that dictated what the Navy could do and couldn't do. This was all in the context of, procurement activity, of buying boats and things...ships. The whole law of government contracts, you know, has been around for 200 years. So it was a long established, systematized legal shop. My impression of NCTA was quite different and not necessarily better or worse!

00;11;01;21 - 00;11;24;09

Rohner: But, you know, it's a brand new agency with, you know, just a little statutory charter. Nobody knew where they were going in the sense of whether, what was going to happen over the next half dozen years or so. Everybody who worked there was, you know, imported from somewhere else. So there were no lifers. They were making up the rules, if you will, as they went along.

00;11;24;12 - 00;11;53;28

Rohner: You know, the legal issues were, were, you know, kind of out of left field. You know, how do you put together agreement among three, three states and six counties or whatever it is, to put a transportation system together? So the issues were, were more, more likely to be novel and, and, and not easily answered. And I remember that there was at least a kind of, sort of just esprit de corps that, that, you know, everybody got along and nobody was, was infatuated with rank.

00;11;53;28 - 00;12;23;18

Rohner: You know, you'd call the boss Steve, if that's what his name was, without worrying about what his title might be. And a lot of, a lot of crossover in terms, I remember very distinctly that there were a couple of weekends when I get, probably the engineering shop or the architects piece needed people to go out and stand on street corners and literally count the people on the busses as they went by. Well, who volunteers? You know, the law clerks volunteer.

00;12;23;20 - 00;12;46;15

Rohner: We were out at 14th and R [Streets NW] counting people on the busses. Actually probably wasn't weekends, it was probably weekdays because they were interested in, in the rush hour. But, you know, I kind of, much more loosey goosey, if you will, than, than the Navy Department.

Schrag: Do you remember what the offices looked like?

Rohner: Vaguely.

00;12;46;17 - 00;13;11;05

Rohner: I worked only on the fifth floor. I don't know how much space they had, whether they spilled over, you know, up or down. But, I mean, I, yeah, I have a vague recollection of what they looked like, but, I think not, not particularly striking. Have you been in that space, Zach?

Schrag: I have not [quietly].

Rohner: All I remember...[chuckles]

00;13;11;09 - 00;13;45;16

Rohner:...It is trite. But, but we were, the law clerks were in a kind of a big workspace room on what would be the east, I guess, southeast side of the of the space, the building. And we had a big floor to ceiling window. I just, the whole wall was window. And I remember one day we had a debate and ultimately a contest as to whether that window was really safe, consisting of each law clerks saying to the other in the room, and hurling himself across the room against the plate glass to see whether it would stay or not stay.

00;13;45;16 - 00;14;16;23

Rohner: I'm happy to report that it stayed.

Schrag: This was on the fifth floor?

Rohner: Yes, yes.

Schrag: So would one negative result have been enough or would you have...? [both laugh]

Rohner: What, what, it would probably have set the tone. And again, just blurry images, my recollection is that the higher up legal people were on the, sort of on the north side of the, whatever space that I, I don't know whether we had the whole fifth floor or whether it was like half of the fifth floor.

00;14;16;26 - 00;14;41;09

Rohner: But there was no, I mean, what I liked most about it, and in that sense, was just a sort of the friendliness and collegiality and, you know, lack of pretension by almost everybody there.

Schrag: Do you have a sense of where that came from?

00;14;41;11 - 00;14;57;29

Rohner: Not really. I mean, at the time, I don't think I was ever conscious of thinking "how did this place come to be like this?" I was thinking, this is kind of neat place. I'm sure it was probably making a contrast with the Navy Department, in my mind, but I don't remember ever particularly focusing on that. Um...

00;14;58;00 - 00;15;22;24

Rohner: My hunch is it, it seemed that it the obvious, that partly was the nature of some of the people. That was just their style. And partly, the novelty of the agency and the novelty of its mission. Uh they were kind of, again, figuring things out as they went along about what the, the legal issues are, were that needed to be answered.

00;15;22;27 - 00;15;53;26

Schrag: So what was your work at the agency?

Rohner: Exclusively as a law clerk. As essentially, you know, doing research, drafting up, you know, reports or drafting up syntheses of cases, and so on. On any issues assigned to us. And, we were talking before the, sort of an overarching issue, at least in the year I was there was there was the issue of interstate compact arrangements, among the jurisdiction and jurisdictions involved.

00;15;53;28 - 00;16;41;02

Rohner: And I think probably related to that was the question of their, their bonding authority. And I can remember we did, doing a lot of research on those kinds of issues of know municipal governance, authority, and powers bonding, interstate compact powers and, and the constitutional basis for those. I, I have, just again, a sense that we probably in you know, along the way did a lot of little miscellaneous things like, you know, collected...all the DC area case law on liability of public transportation for accidents that they caused. [You know old?] pedestrian knock down cases.

00;16;41;04 - 00;17;04;24

Rohner: Not that you know that was so critical to to making some next step in the planning of the system but that some--, somebody decided, you know, along the way in the, in the archives or in the arsenal or whatever you wanna call it, they wanted to at least be able to know or be able to look up, you know, what the generally the state of the law was on pedestrian injuries or, passenger injuries.

00;17;04;27 - 00;17;34;14

Rohner: I don't know, at some point, I suppose that gets factored into, a financial plan, any kind of risk that might be involved there. But it was, it was a, it was no two days particularly the same. It was just kind of different issues coming along. We, I mean, I had the sense that the law clerks were giving a good bit of, of independence, in the sense that nobody was telling us how to do the research, or where to go find it, or what the conclusions ought to be.

00;17;34;14 - 00;18;03;26

Rohner: Just, you know, here's the issue. We don't know what the legal answer is on, you know, can, how can the District of Columbia participate in an interstate compact? Well, go find out.

Schrag: So how did you find out? What methods did you use?

Rohner: Well, we used what we were being taught in law school. And you go to the library and you use all the conventional legal research tools.

00;18;03;28 - 00;18;31;21

Rohner: And we were, you know, the, the other, I had one classmate of mine and I worked there together. And then there were some other kids, I think, from other law schools. But we were, we were all cocky. We knew that the research. We'd been taught well and...And actually, I think we were probably pretty good researchers there, cause I remember a number of times coming back with things, and reporting things, and people saying, "oh, well, I didn't know that" or "I didn't expect to find that that was the case."

00;18;31;21 - 00;19;03;12

Rohner: And so you know, we were, we were both allowed the independence of, of research flexibility. But appreciated, I guess when, when the work product came back.

Schrag: And you said you had some contact with local governments, with their legal departments, is that right?

Rohner: It was probably the, we may have, at least by phone, you know, by requested to, lawyers in the various jurisdictions around town.

00;19;03;15 - 00;19;38;06

Rohner: But what I remember most vividly, I mean, we were talking about this earlier. Since I had now acquired a 1953 Chevrolet, with no heater and balled tires, for $125, as I recall. They said, oh, you got wheels. Okay. They needed somebody to go to every county seat and sit down and talk and gather some information from, I think it was probably the finance people rather than the legal people, maybe have been both.

00;19;38;09 - 00;20;03;05

Rohner: And, and I was assigned that chore. And, you know, in those days there was no Beltway and none of the interstate kind of roads around. So I remember, you know, in one day having to go to Rockville in one afternoon, because we only work in the afternoon. You know, we go to class in the morning and go to work in the afternoon. One afternoon having to go from Downtown to Rockville to Upper Marlboro. Now that...

00;20;03;05 - 00;20;22;20

Rohner: I mean that didn't seem like much these--, now, but, but, you know, it was an hour and a half to Rockville and two hours to get the Upper Marlboro. And then, you know, a different day out to Fairfax and Arlington and so on. And again, I wish I had a clear recollection of what the information was that we were gathering.

00;20;22;22 - 00;20;49;04

Rohner: But I remember thinking, you know, this is great fun. I here I am, out talking to real, not clients, but real people. And digging up real information. Not just law school make believe.

Schrag: Do you have any memory of how you were received there? How these counties thought about putting in a transit system?

00;20;49;07 - 00;21;06;09

Rohner: [slight pause] I can't...I'm not sure I trust [the?] [Memories Act?/ how my memories act?], but I do have a sense that you know, I had to introduce myself as simply a law clerk. You know, I'm out here to gather some information. So, and I do remember having a sense that that I got to be on my good behavior, so they don't think I'm an idiot at least.

00;21;06;09 - 00;21;28;13

Rohner: You know that at least I have to sound like I I know how to go out and gather some information and bring it back. I don't, I honestly just don't recollect any conversation with any of them about on their attitude toward the idea of a subway system. But that probably was just not the kind of thing that I would have...

00;21;28;18 - 00;21;54;29

Rohner: I mean that for me it was a given. You know the work's in progress. So, so I, I'm not sure would have raised that issue or thought much about it if they did.

Schrag: Okay. Do you remember if you've had any contact with the Joint Transportation Committee that had been formed by the local governments, because I know they had their own legal research going on, being done by Jerome Albert who had...?

00;21;55;01 - 00;22;19;28

Rohner: I don't recall any, Zach. I mean I had the other than these kind of excursions, at once or once or twice, I mean, our work was mostly right there, either in the office or running over to the GW Law Library. You know, we weren't we weren't hauled along on, on inter-agency or or other kinds of visits. At least I wasn't.

00;22;20;01 - 00;22;31;26

Schrag: Let me throw a curveball at you. What are your memories of John F. Kennedy and his administration?

Rohner: Oh my God!

00;22;31;28 - 00;23;06;03

Rohner: Well, he was the first president I ever voted for. And I was still a domicile then in Baltimore. And so I remember I had to borrow my aunt's car, on Election Day, to drive to Baltimore to vote. I mean I couldn't vote down here. But I was determined, I was going to do that. I suppose I was very close to typical of most or at least an awful lot of young folks then. We were just all mesmerized by John Kennedy, both before he was elected and afterward.

00;23;06;05 - 00;23;31;24

Rohner: Actually, I never uh, I don't to say, meeting him, but I remember seeing him. He, he was awarded some award from the University in '56 or '57\. I mean he was still a Senator, and I remember being in the group sort of when he came through and thinking, "man, young looking guy, nice looking guy. Interesting personality."

00;23;31;24 - 00;24;08;20

Rohner: Inside...you know, I'd been kind of captured by him from, from even earlier than, than the election. But, you know, it was, it was actually, it was very interesting. I had to scratch my brain to remember details. The very years when he was in the White House were the years that I was in law school! So to the extent we were learning anything in law school about, you know, the public policy, lawmaking, and and major national/international issues, you know, we were relating our law study to what was going on in the, in the real world of Washington, DC.

00;24;08;20 - 00;24;35;27

Rohner: And of the Kennedy Administration. So I remember having, you know, rollicking arguments with classmates about, you know, policies on, or Kennedy's policies on this, that, or the other thing. And I remember when Cuba "debicle"...debacle, uh happened. We were all sitting around in the dorm, across campus, kind of watching it on TV or watching the fallout on TV.

00;24;35;29 - 00;25;01;14

Rohner: No, this uh the...

Schrag [quietly]: The Missile Crises?

Rohner: The Missile...well, see when was it? It was the uh, I can't think, are they separate? Yes, the purported...inept invasion. And, you know, arguing, debating with, with, classmates about, you know, what the hell is going on or the wisdom or lack of wisdom of that.

00;25;01;16 - 00;25;26;12

Rohner: So it was, it was, it was an exciting time, in both in the real world with this, you know, young, vibrant, attractive president, stirring the pot of activity and simultaneously being studying, you know, studying the law and hopefully learning something about the, the profession.

Rohner: So would it be fair to say that his election helped politicize you?

00;25;26;12 - 00;25;57;20

Rohner: Oh absolutely. Absolutely! I mean, I couldn't have told you what the distinction between a Republican and Democrat was before 1960\. I don't, I don't believe.

Schrag: [An attorney one could?].

Rohner: Well, that's...or now some would say. No, absolutely, absolutely.

Schrag: And did that relate to your work in the government? That is, you, you spent summers and afternoons working, technically for the Kennedy administration.

00;25;57;27 - 00;26;07;28

Schrag: Was that something separate in your mind, or did you feel...?

Rohner: I'm, I'm not sure I ever made any particular connection.

00;26;08;01 - 00;26;29;18

[slight pause]

Rohner: But I don't I don't have any recollection of, of thinking anything particular about it. We had, you know, we were a very small law school at that point. My classes like 30 people. The whole school was maybe 110 or something like that. And we didn't have anything like they have now of placement offices, career services.

00;26;29;22 - 00;26;53;14

Rohner: We had one faculty member, who who traded on all his friendships and contacts around the city and out of town for both summer and permanent jobs for, for students. Well, he happened to have been a guy who had been a long time, I don't think he worked for, I think he was a consultant with the Navy, done a lot of legal work for the Navy, so he knew everybody down there.

00;26;53;19 - 00;27;15;04

Rohner: So when it came summer time, you know, he had six slots at the Navy Department. And he said, you know, "Rohner, Provost. And so so, you're going to the Navy Department." We said "Okay, professor, if you say so." I mean it wasn't quite like that that glib, I mean. We had to go out for interviews and so on. But but that was simply one of, a modest number of opportunities that was there.

00;27;15;07 - 00;27;37;26

Rohner: The NCTA thing, I'm, I'm not sure even at the time, I was aware that, you know, or was conscious or cared whether it was a federal agency or a DC government agency or something in between. You know, I know it was an office that needed some law students to do some work, and they issued paychecks.

Schrag: So what were your long term ambitions at that time?

00;27;37;28 - 00;27;49;06

Rohner: I don't know that I had any. Survive...stay out of the military. Actually, that that's...

00;27;49;08 - 00;28;16;26

Rohner: [slight pause] that's not quite so, that latter part of that, is not quite so fair. Vietnam wasn't, it wasn't a thing to worry about. And yet in '62, '63\. But they were drafting people. In fact, I got called for, for army physical. But you know, back then, I was engaged and I expect to get married after graduation and find some kind of job and, you know, start a family and so on.

00;28;16;26 - 00;28;37;14

Rohner: And, you know, in that setting, at least I and probably a lot of others said, you know, I'd rather not have to spend two, three, or four years in the military if I don't have to. So it wasn't so much you don't take any stand against the war in Vietnam. That came later.

Schrag: So you did manage to stay out?

00;28;37;17 - 00;29;08;27

Rohner: Well I did. I by the time they started actually drafting people, in the mid or later '60s, yeah, I was married with, with a kid or two, and, and actually probably too old. By then I was 26 or 7, and they weren't drafting up at that level. So yeah, I, I was never really close.

Schrag: So after you left the NCTA, did you keep tabs on the development of transit in DC?

00;29;08;29 - 00;29;32;17

Rohner: Well, sure. You know, at least as a spectator, just kind of watching out of at a personal interest. My recollection is that when we were there, the timetable was, if all went well, if all went as planned, the system would open in 1967 or '68\. So we were looking at it, you know, it's this is only 4 or 5 years off.

00;29;32;20 - 00;30;01;23

Rohner: Well, obviously it took a little longer than that. I don't recall, you know, after, after I left there, at the end of my senior year. I don't recall ever going back and, you know, and actually talking to people or finding out what's going on or being invited back. But obviously, you know, and I was religiously reading the newspapers to see what the reports were from NCTA and what the planning was.

00;30;01;25 - 00;30;43;20

Rohner: I was delighted when, when they finally broke ground. Actually, I'm not sure this is a part of your, maybe it fits into your history, but by the time the first leg opened in '76? From Union Station to, Farragut Square, right? That was the first leg. I was working on the Hill. I was on sabbatical for about a year and a half, and had been enormously frustrated because to, to get at lunchtime to get from Capitol Hill to Midtown, you know, Connecticut and K [Streets NW] or thereabouts, where the lobbyists were, where you, you would want to go to eat.

00;30;43;23 - 00;31;18;26

Rohner: It was, you know, you had to hail a cab and that was just a pain in the neck! And expensive. And I remember the day that, I think the very first day that, that that first leg of the subway opened. And a huge crowd of us from the hill and jumped on a train came up to Farragut Square and, you know, in about three minutes or whatever it takes and said, you know, this is just, this is just redone the lifestyle of Washington, D.C. I mean, and as evidenced by this first leg, but, you know, imagining what's going to happen as the system expanded.

00;31;18;28 - 00;31;41;29

Schrag: But even that first leg was useful in itself.

Rohner: Oh, absolutely. And there's no question why they put it where ever they put, put it, precisely to get to Capitol Hill. Because I mean, had it been, that was the joke before then. And it's and to some extent, I think it's still the sort of the standing jokes that the way the cab zones are designed, you can go from Capitol Hill to Midtown and it's all in one zone, right?

00;31;41;29 - 00;32;04;03

Rohner: And that's to protect the, the Congresspeople from, from, expense or, or whatever, getting ripped off. And now to be able to do it without having to rely on the cabs was just terrific. And of course, it was, you know, it beautiful, was esthetically attractive and, and, you know, just kind of neat that the, the whole design.

00;32;04;05 - 00;32;30;08

Rohner: And then, you know, it wasn't terribly long after that, you probably know the timetable better than I, that they had the line out here to the University. It may have been two years later, something like that. And by then, I was back on campus again.

Schrag: And then when did they move the law school?

Rohner: Well, no, I'm sorry. The law school, which had been downtown, moved back up here in '66, long before the subway opened.

00;32;30;11 - 00;32;54;04

Rohner: But it, the law school then was on the other side of campus. But, but that same sense of what a pain in the neck it is to go downtown for lunch from campus. It was just, it was horrendous! I mean, you for one thing, you can't get cabs to come to the campus. You couldn't then. And even if you lucked out and found one, you know, on Michigan Avenue or something, then it cost you ten bucks or whatever to get downtown. And getting back was just as bad.

00;32;54;06 - 00;33;20;24

Rohner: And the day they opened the station here, I guess it had already been opened to Rhode Island Avenue for a while. But when they finally opened this station, I remember having the same feeling, you know? Man, this is just...redone. Um not only, you know, my personal lifestyle going downtown to lunch, but...it's redone um whatever...

00;33;20;26 - 00;33;53;05

Rohner:...the future of the university in terms of access to it by by public transportation. This is, I'm wandering off. But, but when, when I was a dean, when, when we had to build this building. And one of the first decisions we had to make in that process was deciding where of several sites on the campus we wanted to put this, a building this size. And there were a couple of places up, sort of in the north end, very picturesque places, actually.

00;33;53;08 - 00;34;12;12

Rohner: But as soon as the, as the university vice president, whoever showed me this site on the map and said, well, you know, here you can go down where the old football stadium used to be. You can, you can put the law school down there. I said, that's it. That's where we are going. Precisely because, you know, we're 100 yards from the Metro station.

00;34;12;14 - 00;34;33;24

Schrag: So it came full circle with your transportation?

Rohner: Well that's right! That's right. Certain, well, whatever, circularity to that.

Schrag: And I assume that's for more reason so that you can go downtown for lunch. How do you think...?

Rohner: Oh that's. Oh, no, I think, I'm thinking of the attractiveness of that to students.

Schrag: Right. So how do you don't the Metro has affected their experience?

00;34;33;26 - 00;34;51;28

Rohner: Well, you know, the trouble is, after a couple of ye--, after you lose the students who had to make the transition, you know, who we've had to drive their cars, now can ride Metro. Or who had, who rode Metro, they had to walk a half mile across the campus. You know, their reaction was just ecstatic, you know, glad I don't have to drive anymore.

00;34;51;29 - 00;35;15;09

Rohner: I can take the Metro and I only have to walk a hundred yards. But after a couple of years, nobody remembers the alternatives and they just kind of take it for granted. But, you know, we've also got underground parking here. So any student who wants to drive can and can park inside. But if you ever hang around, you just see traffic endlessly from this building to the metro and back the other way.

00;35;15;11 - 00;35;38;11

Rohner: So I don't think it any question but that, the Metro has made the University just much more attractive, at that level of, of accessibility. I never drive downtown, very rarely, unless you know me, I'm going to something with my wife and she wants to ride home. But, you know, if I'm going down for lunch or whatever to, to the Courts or something...

00;35;38;11 - 00;35;46;21

Rohner:...I always go jump on the Metro.

Schrag: How do you get to work in the morning?

Rohner: Well, I drive. [laughs]

00;35;46;23 - 00;36;12;10

Rohner: I drive it. Yeah. Yeah, I'm one of those. I could get here by Metro, but. I'm five miles from uh one of, one of two Metro stations. And as, you know, I do once in a while if the car's in the shop or that kind of thing, I don't hesitate to jump on the train in the morning.

00;36;12;12 - 00;36;23;28

Rohner: I'm trying, I'm hoping that as I'm talking to you, that anything more uh concrete about life at NCTA would, would come back to me.

00;36;24;00 - 00;36;33;05

Rohner: You ought go down and look at their, at their space up there on the fifth floor. I can't, I have no idea who's in there.

00;36;33;07 - 00;37;01;29

Rohner: Oh, actually! This is probably distorted and maybe a little bit of an exaggeration, but I discovered and outright scandal. And of course, my work down there, there were a couple of models that we were looking at as, I don't know why, there's not, not examples of interstate compacts, but...maybe examples of federally funded projects? Maybe that may have been what it was.

00;37;02;01 - 00;37;18;05

Rohner: One of them was the Saint Lawrence Seaway, and the other was, what is DC Stadium, which is now RFK Stadium. Not not the new one, but the one down, you know, along the Anacostia.

00;37;18;08 - 00;37;51;27

Rohner: And I did every bit of research I could figure out, every source that I could fathom, and came to the conclusion that Congress had never authorized a penny more than X dollars. Whatever. You know 10 million, maybe. Twenty. But that the actual cost of construction of that place was twice the figure Congress had appropriated. And so I, don't ask me how that happened, but I ended up going back and reporting this to the to the folks at NCTA.

00;37;51;27 - 00;38;29;18

Rohner: And they, they did all double checking, I think, and verify that I was right. I wasn't making it up. And then agreed that there was no point making the DC government and Congress mad, and so they weren't going to squeal on anybody. But somehow, twice the amount appropriated got spent on DC Stadium. I never figured out how.

Schrag: Which seems to me almost typical for some, for big federal projects.

Rohner: Could be.

Schrag: [I mean if?] you look at how much money was spent to develop the F-16, or to build the Metro, or to build the interstate highway...

00;38;29;20 - 00;38;55;28

Schrag:...I wonder if cost estimates were just sort of, conventionally deflated?

Rohner: Well, that could be. But, but I think what I was seeing was that that, you know, it would be one thing if the Congress had appropriated 10 million and then the estimates to come back, that it's going to be 20 million. And Congress said, "oh, okay, we'll appropriate another ten."

00;38;56;01 - 00;39;17;11

Rohner: There was never the second appropriation.

Schrag: I see.

Rohner: There was an appropriation capped. And, you know, it's one of these things that said no more than X dollars to be spent on DC Stadium. The actual cost became, were findable and discoverable. And they were substantially higher than had been appropriated. And I could figure, nobody, nobody at NCTA also really cared.

00;39;17;11 - 00;39;32;02

Rohner: But we never, never quite figured out where that money came from! If Congress never appropriated it, how did it get spent? But it did.

00;39;32;04 - 00;40;06;15

Rohner: What else, Zach?

Schrag: Do you have any comments on, on the coming of Home Rule since you were here for that period? I'm trying to figure out what the relationship, since, since Home Rule came in '74, just as everything was being built and planned. And then the Metro opens in '76\. In some ways, it seems to me a big contrast between the federal vision of the NCTA and what ultimately became a much more localized structure.

[slight pause]

00;40;06;17 - 00;40;34;01

Rohner: I certainly don't think I had any, it was making any kind of conscious connection at the time. Yeah, when you live around here for a long time, you can't help but sort of be on the Home Rule bandwagon. Yeah, sure. Of course. Yeah. The City deserves Home Rule. But needed the best of my recollection, needed then and even now, was I making...

00;40;34;01 - 00;41;00;04

Brunner:...any particular connection between the two. Actually, what have, I may need your prompt, um NCA--, NCTA started out as a federal agency, right?

Schrag: Right

Brunner [continuing to talk] After the federal government trying to plan a system for the region, did it become, did it, did it change at some point?

Schrag: Well, there were, there were provisions in the law that it could become a federal corporation, like Amtrak eventually became, to build and run the Metro.

00;41;00;06 - 00;41;22;28

Schrag: But if the Interstate Compact got worked out in time, they would hand the keys over to a compact agency instead. And that's what they end up...doing.

Brunner: [interjecting] Which is Metro.

Schrag: Which is WMATA. I mean, it's it's a combination of them, compact and authority, which is, you know, what makes it a little different from, some of the other compact creations, like the Port Authority.

00;41;22;28 - 00;41;55;07

Schrag: Also, it, involves DC, as you were saying, which tangles up everything a bit because it's not technically, it's two states and a district.

Brunner: Right. That's right.

Schrag: But,...what's interesting is that's happening, right as Johnson is appointing the mayor for DC for the first time in a century and saying that eventually there will be elections. And so I don't really know if there, if that's just coincidence or whether I can make anything more of that.

00;41;55;10 - 00;42;20;17

Brunner: Not for me. I just don't, I mean, there are a whole levels of world affairs to say nothing about, even local affairs. It just were going right over my head at that point.

Schrag: And so you left the NCTA when you graduated...

Brunner: [speaking over Schrag] Yeah...

Schrag:...in the spring of '63?

Brunner: Right.

Schrag: And weren't much in contact with them after that?

Brunner: Well, I spent the next year then in California at Stanford Law School before I came back.

00;42;20;19 - 00;42;30;17

Brunner: So, no, I mean, I obviously had no contact with them then. And I had no reason really to have any contact with them.

00;42;30;20 - 00;42;45;03

Brunner: It may be that my classmate and I and, and one of these guys whose names I give ya, Jim Phippard was was the one who was our friend. We may have had, you know, lunch together once or twice, I [unintelligible] swear to that.

00;42;45;06 - 00;43;07;25

Brunner: You know, just kind of, I mean that was, that was a part time job for nine months. That's all! Walk away from it and I really think back. And in a little vignette, again, these, the funny thing to stick in your mind. When I was a senior, I was applying to Stanford for, like a legal writing instructor position, just a one year contract.

00;43;07;28 - 00;43;27;24

Brunner: And now here I am for a little tiny school, nondescript school in Washington, DC. And I'm trying to think you know how can I write my, my application letter to kind of catch their attention. And it so happened at the same time, they were developing their BART system out there. So I went on for some page and a half or so describing my work at NCTA.

00;43;28;00 - 00;43;51;21

Brunner: They probably, they probably paragraph and a half, not a page land, but talking about my experience at NCTA, my interest in public transportation, and my familiarity, such as it was with the planning for BART, and I, I got the job! Now, I never, had no idea whether anybody even read that letter and much less, reacted to it.

00;43;51;23 - 00;44;19;20

Brunner: But I always attributed and connected NCTA with helping me get that position in Stanford.

Schrag: So did you end up doing anything with BART?

Brunner: [quietly] No. They were...my recollection is they weren't, they weren't very far off the ground even yet. You probably know timetables or schedules better than I. For one thing I was down [Palo Alto?], um newly married.

00;44;19;20 - 00;44;30;28

Brunner: I [wasn't] interested in going into the city and doing anything for them.

00;44;31;00 - 00;44;52;09

[slight pause]

Brunner: What else? You ask good questions. [unintelligible as Schrag starts to answer him]

Schrag: Um...I don't know. It's the detail that matters. For example, John [Reynells?], wrote a little thing about his time at NCTA, and he said they had one of the few photocopiers [Brunner laughs] that for an agency that small to have its own photocopier, you know, this is Xerox had been invented, what, 1960 or something?

00;44;52;09 - 00;45;23;03

Schrag: So this was '62\. And they had one and that was, that was clout. And, they had, you know, this tiny little agency had two officers. The administrator and deputy administrator, confirmed by the Senate. And that was clout. So it was a small agency, but almost, a boutique prestige agency. So it's just wondering if that filtered down at all to, to your level?

00;45;23;06 - 00;45;53;24

Brunner: I don't, again I don't have any particular recollection of that, but there's no doubt that we, we realized that we weren't just a throwaway, you know, we were new and small, and, you know, in--, incomplete in terms of [work?] product, but I don't think we had any doubt that we were important. And not just because we're going to build a transportation system, but that you know Congress had created us specifically for that purpose.

00;45;53;24 - 00;46;15;27

Brunner: And was presumably watching us. Yeah, you know I remember never, never feeling, certainly never feeling embarrassed, but, but, but feeling, you know, a certain, certain kind of pride or whatever, at working there. And I think it was not just because it was fun.

00;46;15;29 - 00;46;41;08

Brunner: [Unintelligible] the details, I remember are like throwing ourselves against the plate glass window. We also, first time I had ever seen anything like this, we had a, a secretary, who was about six feet five, male, and a former Marine, who smoked, chain smoked. And you could smoke inside in those days, you know, in the office. So here's this great big tall guy, you know, with big long knees worse than mine, trying to hunch underneath this little typing table.

00;46;41;11 - 00;47;11;13

Brunner: But he was there, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. I almost remember his name, not quite. I think it was, he was a delightful guy. And certainly a competent secretary, but I just, maybe that was my breakthrough on on sexism. [chuckles]

Schrag: Did a lot of people at the agency smoke? I just wonder, because this was, right at the time that they're saying we're going to build the subway and we're not going to have any smoking on it.

00;47;11;15 - 00;47;34;28

Brunner: I can't tell you how many, but, but there were no inhibitions on smoking in your office at that point. I know that. That was still true even 15 years later, when I was on the Hill. That's something, that's one thing that has changed fairly rapidly. Can't smoke anywhere indoors anymore.

00;47;35;00 - 00;47;46;27

Schrag: And do you remember anything about that sort of Farragut Square neighborhood, at the time?

00;47;46;29 - 00;48;09;11

Brunner: Yeah. I mean, our law school again was right up the street, three, four blocks. So that, that was, that was where we hung out. You know we'd get down in the morning and, and usually grab lunch at one of the little places over on Connecticut Avenue. I, I never quite counted every one, but between Farragut Square and, and DuPont Circle, I don't think there's a building that's the same and now...

00;48;09;11 - 00;48;38;14

Brunner:...as was there then. I mean, virtually every one of them has been knocked down and rebuilt, or at least built around a couple of the old shells that are still there. So it doesn't, it really didn't look anything like, it doesn't look now anything like it did then. The buildings tended to be like, excuse me, except for the Mayflower, which still sits there, but the buildings tended to be obviously less modern, you know, shorter. Uh and there weren't all the upscale shops that are there now.

00;48;38;17 - 00;49;03;24

Brunner: Much more you know boutique-y kind of places. But, but I don't, my sense was not the kind of high quality upscale shops that are there now. Plus there are a lot of cheap restaurants and bars, and that's what we thrived on. One of the, what's the name of the restaurant that is famous for these very low inexpensive meals?

00;49;03;26 - 00;49;26;26

Brunner: There's only one left in town...

Schrag: Sholl's Cafeteria?

Brunner: Sholl's Yeah, there was a Sholl's there on, on the west side of Connecticut Avenue. Literally, I remember for 89 cents getting a big lunch and being full at the end of it. It was a bars up the street, a little place called Linda's. [And, Chairman Bard and the basement?].

00;49;26;29 - 00;49;58;00

Brunner: Can't remember the name of it, terrible. But it was, for young, mostly single folks. It was a fun place to be, you know, for not, not formal partying, but, you know, quasi partying, going out for a beer after class or getting something to eat. I remember when I came back to, to start teaching, actually, only a year after I graduated, I was teaching part time and there was a little Chinese restaurant up near in DuPont Circle where I could chow down for a dollar and a quarter.

00;49;58;02 - 00;50;16;03

Brunner: So it was, it was less classy by far, but still, you know, kind of one of the main drags in town. And just a fun, interesting place to be. A great place to people watch. I think it has, it still is.

00;50;16;05 - 00;50;30;16

Schrag: But not necessarily the same kind of center of gravity for offices that it is now.

Brunner: No, no. Where was the senior center of gravity for offices in those days?

00;50;30;18 - 00;50;37;15

Brunner: Probably over um, east of the White House.

00;50;37;17 - 00;50;47;00

Brunner: Just, [unintelligible] think. I guess it was just beginning to kind of sprawl out K Street.

00;50;47;02 - 00;51;07;03

Brunner: And there were, there were some over there. I think that, I mean, like some of the big law firms were already in that area. But in, you know, in, in a generation earlier in terms of buildings and architectural style.

00;51;07;06 - 00;51;18;02

Brunner: What else do I remember that's any, that's of any conceivable value?

00;51;18;05 - 00;51;39;12

Brunner: You know, I was thinking about this Zach, since you called. I don't think I've saved, not a scrap of paper from there. And and actually other jobs I've had, I've always done that. You know, keep a notebook of memos done or something like that. But I don't have a thing left from NCTA.

00;51;39;15 - 00;51;48;29

Brunner: But I bet you these other guys, Phippard or Malone would.

00;51;49;02 - 00;52;13;23

Brunner: It, would you have any interest in the name of my classmate who was, you know...

Schrag: [quietly responds] Sure.

Brunner: probably with me, at the, at all the, all the events I just described. [Unintelligible] got paper [mumbling]. I don't know where he's...What the hell he's doing? I haven't seen him for years. Mr., it's Jean, J Provost.

00;52;13;25 - 00;52;30;05

Brunner:...Junior, I think. I think he works at the, at Post Office Department.

00;52;30;07 - 00;52;48;16

Brunner: I think, look real quick. In fact, you know, the last time I talked to him a year ago or so and he said, "let's get Phippard and go have a beer!" And we haven't done it yet. But you might prompt me, though.

00;52;48;19 - 00;52;57;1

Brunner: U.S. Postal Service, L'Enfant Plaza. [Should I give?] you a phone number? Go ahead...

Schrag: That'd be terrific.

00;52;57;17 - 00;53;01;21

Brunner: [Three?]

00;53;01;24 - 00;53;16;22

Brunner: Two. Six. Eight.

[pause in speaking, sound of writing on paper]

00;53;16;25 - 00;53;43;14

Schrag: Thank you.

Brunner: Now I don't have any idea where those other two guys are, except I think they're in town and still alive. Last I knew or saw them. They probably in the phone book. Actually...[mumbling]

Schrag: Why don't I stop the recording now? And, we'll see if they're...thank you.

[End of recording]